

**BANGLADESH
UPDATE**

1,541
New cases in 24hrs

3,45,805
Total cases

4,881
Deaths

2,52,335
Recoveries

**GLOBAL
UPDATE**

952,911
Deaths

30,530,546
Total cases

Land of fortune!

FROM PAGE 1

directly to the government, she would be entitled to approximately Tk 6 lakh. Instead, the land now belonged to a syndicate of land grabbers, who just made a profit of Tk 5,70,000.

In September 2018, land acquisition began in Sonapara village under Kalamarchhara union of Moheshkhali for the Single Mooring Point Project being implemented by Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation, according to government documents.

Forty acres of land were acquired there, leading to eviction of at least 400 poor families including Sabiha's. The estimated market value of this land is Tk 14 crore, and the land acquisition value is Tk 42 crore.

Under the Acquisition and Requisition of Immovable Property Act, 2017, the government is supposed to pay three times the market value of land acquired in compensation for the owners.

Like in Sonapara, the land acquisition process for 20 other big development projects in Cox's Bazar has given a nexus of district land officials, politicians, journalists and touts a golden opportunity to rake in a fortune.

The clique managed to contain commotions and quell protests until one person got arrested by Rab with cash and diaries, which turned out to be the key to a Pandora's Box.

Fajle Azim Md Sibgat Ullah, convener of a platform called 'Jagrotro Chhatra Samaj' formed to protest irregularities in the land acquisition, told The Daily Star that the syndicate forced people to sell off their land at lower rates.

At least 400 shanties such as Sabiha's were vandalised after they refused to sell their homesteads.

"We have had many demonstrations and human chains to draw the authority's attention to the harassment and sufferings of people due to the process of land acquisition. Instead of getting remedies, we were threatened by influentials and named as accused in extremism-related cases," he said.

The victims of eviction were afraid to name the influentials involved.

However, a recent investigation report by the Anti-Corruption Commission, a copy of which was obtained by The Daily Star, revealed that Kalamarchhara Union Parishad Chairman Tarek Bin Osman Sharif and his elder brother Noman Sharif lead the racket of six in the union.

Both of them deny this. Contacted, Osman Sharif said he was unaware of the ACC investigation. "I actually don't know about it. I was not involved in any racket of land grabbing," he said.

According to the ACC report, the syndicate goes much higher up the ladder than the local union parishad chairman.

THE NEXUS

According to the ACC report, the land acquisition branch of Cox's Bazar district administration, top political leaders of the district and local journalists, along with middlemen, formed a strong nexus to make huge sums of money from the government's land acquisition and development projects in Cox's Bazar.

On Monday, the ACC froze 11 accounts and seized Tk 17,48,000 from Mujibor Rahman, mayor of Cox's Bazar municipality and also general secretary of Cox's Bazar district Awami League. They also seized Tk 4 lakh in an account belonging to Noman Sharif on the same day.

The ACC earlier on September 1 froze the accounts of former councillor Javed Md Kaiser Novel, where they found around Tk 10 crore.

And on Thursday, the watchdog found Tk 75 lakh from a deposit scheme of Novel and five deeds of land worth Tk 5 crore in the name of Mujibor Rahman.

"It's a huge nexus comprising big shots of the district -- it has held people hostage throughout the land acquisition process. We have identified the nexus and have frozen the bank accounts of local councillors who were actively involved in the racket. Definitely, we will take action against them as per the law," an official of Chattogram district coordination office of ACC told The Daily Star.

Mujibor Rahman or Javed Md Kaiser Novel could not be reached throughout the last week, as their phones were switched off.

As per publicly available data, the government is acquiring around 28,000 acres of land for 21 projects across Cox's Bazar district with a total

budget of Tk 3.5 lakh crore.

The projects include coal-based power plant at Matarbari, LNG terminal, Eastern Refinery's Depot, Economic Zones, Hightech Park, Tourism Park, submarine base, rail tracks, Sheikh Kamal International Stadium, expansion of airport and Khurushkul Ashrayan.

Given the intensity of land acquisition activities, the Cox's Bazar district administration created five additional posts of land acquisition officers in 2018 to accelerate the acquisition process.

SO EASY TO MAKE MONEY!

» A middleman transacted **Tk 50 crore** in last 2 years through his bank accounts although he has no business or any other income source

» Middlemen gave more than **Tk 4.6 crore** to land officers, surveyors and clerks

However, the ACC investigation revealed that, instead of speeding up the process, the officials formed a syndicate to force affected populations to sell off land at low prices so it can be resold to the government at three to five times the cost. They also often compelled landowners to pay huge sums of bribes to get necessary documents.

The ACC filed a case in March this year after Rab-15 seized Tk 93 lakh in February from the houses of three land surveyors and arrested one of them, Md Wasim, with three diaries.

An official of the Chattogram office of ACC, seeking anonymity, told The Daily Star that they analysed over 11 sacks of documents, which Rab seized from those middlemen, to investigate the case.

The ACC arrested middleman Selim Ullah in July and two other middlemen named Sala Uddin and Kamruddin in August this year with a huge cache of documents, which provided details of officials involved with the syndicate and the amount received by each.

Diaries seized from the three exposed the names of Additional Deputy Commissioner (revenue) Mohammad Ashraf Afsar, Cox's Bazar Municipality Mayor Mujibor Rahman, land acquisition officers Dewan Moudud Ahmed, Mominul Haque and Razaul Karim, additional land acquisition officer Bijoy Kumar Singha, and district administration office assistant Abul Kashem.

Apart from this, the names of three journalists from Cox's Bazar made their way to the list. Two among them are from television and another one works for a national daily.

Major Mehedi Hasan, company commander of Cox's Bazar Rab-15, told The Daily Star that all documents seized by them have been handed over to the ACC for the investigation.

He said the government is implementing at least 13 big projects in Moheshkhali upazila of Cox's Bazar. They received allegations earlier this year about the racket which has been depriving people of due land price.

"As per the allegation, we started spying around the land acquisition office and came to know about this racket. On February 19, we arrested a land surveyor and seized cash money from his residence. ... A total of Tk 93 lakh was seized by the Rab," he added.

Dewan Moudud Ahmed was in-charge of land acquisition for Matarbari Coal-Based Power Plant, which is being set up acquiring 1,212 acres, as per the ACC's investigation.

The anti-graft body found he formed a syndicate of 12 middlemen and surveyors at his office.

Muhibullah, a middleman of the syndicate, was found to have transacted Tk 50 crore through his three bank accounts in the last two years although he had no business or any other income source.

SHARE OF THE PIE

An analysis of middleman Kamruddin's diary, a copy of which The Daily Star obtained, revealed that he gave a total of Tk 1,23,75,000 to land acquisition officer Bijoy Kumar Singha and 14 surveyors in 2018.

From interrogation by the ACC, it was confirmed that they got the money as commissions.

Md Salauddin, another middleman, handed over Tk 3,45,85,000 to seven surveyors and kanungos (land office clerks), and Bijoy Kumar.

According to ACC sources, one diary mentions Selim Ullah sent Tk 6,70,000 to district administration

office assistant Abul Kashem, and Tk 62,000 to land acquisition officer Rejaul Karim and a surveyor named Farid.

Ashraf Afsar, additional deputy commissioner (revenue), was in charge of issuing "advice," which is a written form aimed at verifying the authenticity of the cheque.

ACC officials said Ashraf Afsar did not issue any advice unless people paid him two percent against the price of acquired land. They discovered that he did not issue any advice for 570 cheques since February, when a surveyor was arrested and Tk 93 lakh was seized from the houses of three surveyors.

The ACC observed that no transaction in the accounts of those people -- who were name appeared in the diary -- took place since February. The dates of transactions coincided with the dates of releasing cheques and issuing advice by the land acquisition officer.

When an owner deposits his cheque received from the government for land acquisition, the bank asks the district admin about its authenticity.

Then the ADC on behalf of the district admin issues an advice form which contains the cheque number and which asserts that the cheque is valid.

Ashraf Afsar claimed that the allegation against him was completely baseless. "I hope it will be revealed in the investigation," he added.

Mohammad Rejaul Karim, land acquisition officer, now serving as the UNO of Hatiya upazila, claimed to The Daily Star that he was not involved in such practice and he has any idea why his name surfaced in the diary.

District administration office assistant Abul Kashem could not be reached for comment.

Bijoy Kumar Singha, now serving at Khagrachhari district administration, admitted to knowing Salauddin as he used to come to his office over his land affairs.

"He [Salauddin] used to come to take payment of his land. But I did not know that he was a middleman. If he has my name in his diary, ask him about it," he said.

Mominul Haque, land acquisition officer of Cox's Bazar, now the UNO of Ramgati upazila in Laxmipur, told The Daily Star that the middlemen were using his name as diversion.

"I tried to ensure 100 percent clarity in my work and the allegation is quite false," he added.

Dewan Moudud Ahmed, former land officer now serving as the UNO of Ullapara upazila of Sirajganj, said it won't be fair to comment on something that is still sub judice.

Secondly, the ACC can and should investigate if any allegation arises centring the land acquisition and he would clarify things from his end if the watchdog contacts him.

"There are several thousand acres of land being acquired in Cox's Bazar with massive legal tangles involved, particularly in Moheshkhali," he said on Thursday.

He said people bought land but did not do the mutations while many families had no partition deeds. When the land acquisition office asks them for those things, they take it as harassment.

On the other hand, the office could not properly maintain documents as there was a huge work pressure. Shortage of manpower made it worse, he added.

When asked about the involvement of the middlemen, he said he would talk later as he was on an official assignment.

Cox's Bazar Deputy Commissioner Md Kamal Hossain did not receive phone calls or reply to text messages of this correspondent over the last few days.

On Thursday, Md Maksudur Rahman Patwary, secretary of the land ministry, told The Daily Star that they transferred land acquisition officers after the allegations surfaced last year and initiated departmental action.

He welcomed the ACC investigation, saying it was a criminal offence if there were such transactions of money and none would be spared if found involved.

"I have warned the Cox's Bazar district admin if anything like this further happens, stern action permitted by the law would be taken."

He also said he ordered conducting mobile court drives against the middlemen roaming around the district land office.



The side of a truck carrying a consignment of bricks from Manikganj's Singair upazila burst open as it was entering Dhaka through Gabtoli and the contents spilled onto the road. This photo was taken yesterday morning.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

Hefajat leader Shafi dies

FROM PAGE 1

Obaidullah, publicity secretary of Hefajat's Chattogram unit.

Doctors declared him dead around 6:30pm.

Quoting the family members, Dr Aftabul Islam, deputy director of CMCH, said Ahmad Shafi had been suffering from diabetes, pressure and heart related problems for a long time.

Ahmad Shafi's son Anas Madani, who was also removed from the post of assistant director of Hathazari Madrasa on Wednesday night, told journalists at Asgor Ali Hospital that his father's body will be taken to Hathazari by road.

"He was doing better. But his condition deteriorated following the incident at the madrasa."

Ahmad Shafi will be buried at the Hathazari graveyard following a Namaz-e Janaza to be held around 2:00pm today.

Ahmad Shafi, a renowned Islamic scholar, was born in 1920 at Notuarta village of Shilok union under Rangunia upazila where he received his primary religious education at Muabinal Islamia Madrasa.

Then he went to Hathazari Darul Ulum Moinul Islam Madrasa. Later, he studied at famous the Darul Uloom Deoband in India.

In 1986, Ahmad Shafi took charge of Hathazari Madrasa, the biggest Qawmi madrasa in the country.

He later became the chairman of Befaulq Madarisil Arabia Bangladesh, also called as the Qawmi Madrasa Education Board.

His organisation Hefajat-e Islam first appeared on the scene in 2009 by protesting a draft national women development policy that provided equal inheritance rights to women.

A year later, it demanded cancellation of a proposed national education policy that focused on secular curriculum for schools and colleges.

In 2013, Hefajat grabbed the spotlight when it appeared on the scene as force countering the Shabbagh movement, initiated by bloggers and online activists demanding death penalty for war criminal Abdul Quader Mollah.

After the February 15 killing of Rajib, a blogger who was branded an atheist, Hefajat began to allege that some of the Shabbagh activists' blog posts offended the "Muslim's religious feelings".

On April 6, its activists and supporters marched towards Dhaka and held a rally at Shapla Chattar with a 13-point demand, including enactment of anti-blasphemy act and stringent punishment of "atheist bloggers".

Then came the May 5 mayhem. As Hefajat-e Islam activists turned increasingly violent and kept Motijheel occupied for nearly 12 hours after their rally there on May 5, 2013, the law enforcers swung into action after midnight and drove them away.

On May 6, senior leaders of Hefajat moved to Chattogram claiming government launched a mass killing at their rally. But they could not show up with the exact figure of how many died on that night.

Police filed around 83 cases against Hefajat leader across the country for creating anarchy. Many of senior leaders were arrested soon after the incident.

But things would change in the following years and Shafi and the Awami League government would become close to each other. Earlier, he seemed leaning towards the BNP.

At a "Shokrana Mahfil" in 2019, Shafi accorded Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina the title "Mother of the Qawmi" for recognising the highest Qawmi degree as equivalent to a post-graduate degree.

Ahmed Shafi often admired the government for "its role in protecting Islam".

A faction led by Junayed Babunagari, secretary general of Hefajat was dead against the Hefajat's soft approach to the government, resulting in the latest clash on the premises of Hathazari madrasa.

CONTROVERSY

The Hefajat chief went on to make news now and then with his controversial statements, for which he often drew flak from different quarters, especially for his conservative remarks that belittled women.

He was known for his stance against women's education and employment. In 2013, during a sermon he made suggestive remarks, comparing women with tamarind.

"You women should stay within the four walls of your houses. Sitting inside your husband's home you should take care of your husband's furniture and raise your children, your male kids. These are your jobs. Why

do you have to go outside?" he went on saying.

In 2019, during a sermon delivered to the parents of the students of Hathazari madrasa, Shafi asked the parents not to send their daughters to school beyond grade four or five.

CONDOLENCE

Condolences poured in from different socio-political parties, Islamic organisations immediately after the demise of Ahmad Shafi.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, different ministers and distinguished personalities expressed profound shock and sorrow at his death.

In her condolence message, Sheikh Hasina said Allama Shafi made important contributions to preaching and expansion of Islamic education in the country.

"Besides, Allama Shafi played a role in modernisation of Qawmi madrasa education system," she said. The premier prayed for the salvation and eternal peace of his departed soul and conveyed profound sympathy to the bereaved family.

President Abdul Hamid, in a message said, Allama Shafi had played an important role in promoting Islam at home and abroad. "At his death, the country lost a prominent Islamic scholar."

Disruption

FROM PAGE 1

Hossain, assistant general manager (commerce) of Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Corporation (BIWTC) Aricha Regional Office, said that the ferry services on Paturia-Daulatdia route is normal with 18 of 19 ferries are in operation.

Passengers and emergency-goods vehicles have been given priority. So several hundred goods laden trucks are now stranded at the Paturia terminal, he said.

On the other hand, many truck drivers alleged that some staffers of BIWTC are taking extra money from them for ferry tickets. They are taking Tk 2,000-2,500 against the actual price 1,460, they alleged.

BIWTC official denied such allegations.

"Nobody officially complained to the office. If anybody complains, we will take action against those found guilty," Khandoker Tanvir Hossain said.

Refugees settle down

FROM PAGE 1

"Among the 22 Rohingya families who settled in Harin Mara Para, most of them have NIDs already. My husband and I still haven't got the card as we don't have enough money."

The Daily Star obtained the copy of one Jafar Alam's NID, which was issued on November 2, 2017.

The birthplace of Jafar, now settled in Harin Mara para, is shown as Cox's Bazar on his NID. But his neighbour Fathema Begum told this correspondent that he is from Myanmar.

Jafar denied this, saying he is originally from Cox's Bazar and moved to Bandarban and had his NID made here.

Around 100 Rohingyas are settled in Harin Mara, said another local. Habibullah, chairman of Naikhyangchhari's Dochari union, said, "There are around 300 Rohingyas in this union who came here a few years ago."

Seeking anonymity, a few locals of Dochari area claimed that Habibullah's parents also came over from Myanmar.

When asked about it, Habibullah said, "My parents lived in Cox's Bazar's Ramu area many years ago but I was born in Dochari."

Local sources, including several public representatives, said around 3,000 Rohingya families have settled in Bandarban district -- mostly in Naikhyangchhari, Lama, Alikadam,

Rowangchhari and Bandarban Sadar.

Kafil Uddin, vice chairman of Alikadam, said around 500 Rohingya families have settled in the upazila in the last seven to eight years and there is even a village called Burmaiya [Burmese] Para here.

U Kaynuw Marma, chairman of Sualok union, said while there were no Rohingyas here before 2007-2008, more than 200 Rohingya families now live in his area.

He added that around 50 of these families are registered in the area's voter list.

Jumlian Amlai, president of the Bandarban chapter of Parbatya Chattogram Forest and Land Rights Protection Movement, said, "Local administrations in the CHT are not only helping the Rohingya refugees settle in the CHT, they are also including them in the voter list and providing them with permanent residency certificates."

He added, "The state machinery is directly assisting the Rohingyas to settle in the CHT."

Mohammed Rezaul Karim, district election officer of Bandarban, said there is a syndicate which takes money from the Rohingyas for documents of citizenship.

"In 2019, we cancelled around 1,900 applications due to this Rohingya issue," said the election officer, referring to when they suspected that the applicants were not Bangladeshis,

based on the documents submitted.

"Taking money from the Rohingyas, local representatives give them birth certificates," he added.

Contacted, Md Mahub Alam, additional district magistrate of Bandarban, "We have no information of Rohingyas settling in Bandarban recently and those who are getting various government allowances might have come to this area long ago."

The Daily Star has found that the number of Rohingya refugees in all camps of Ukhiya and Teknaf of Cox's Bazar has actually decreased to 8,600 lakh as of July this year despite 76,000 children being born in the last three years.

It was about 9.57 lakh in December 2018, as per reports of the Inter Sector Coordination Group (ISCG).

Civil society members, local public representatives, and local non-government organisations working with the refugees say some Rohingyas have left the camps for good or some leave for certain periods of time.

Rezaul Karim Chowdhury, executive director of COAST Trust, which has been working with the Rohingyas since the 2017 influx, said Rohingyas are desperate to leave the camps and integrate into Bangladeshi society as the repatriation process continues to be delayed.

The administration has to take care of this issue before it is too late, he added.

Belarus borders still open despite Lukashenko 'war' talk

AFP, Minsk

Belarus' borders remained open yesterday after President Alexander Lukashenko announced they would be closed as he warned of a possible "war" with neighbouring countries, whom he accuses of supporting a burgeoning opposition movement.

The country's border guard service said on its Telegram channel that "checks have been stepped up" and

"tactical reinforcements have been deployed", but that "checkpoints are permitting people to enter and leave".

Lukashenko, a strongman who has ruled for 26 years, had told a women's forum Thursday that "half" of the Belarusian army would be deployed to the country's borders with Lithuania, Latvia, Poland and Ukraine.

The frontiers themselves would be closed in view of the threat of a "hot war", he added.

India to permit

FROM PAGE 1

items. Meanwhile, retailers were selling each kg of onion at prices higher by Tk 10 to Tk 20 than the prices of wholesalers in Dhaka and Chattogram cities yesterday.

Consumers said some unscrupulous traders have jacked up the prices due to poor monitoring of markets by the administration.

At Khatunganj wholesale market in Chattogram, Indian onion was sold for Tk 60-70 per kg, but the variety was sold for Tk 70-90 per kg at retail markets in the city, reports our staff correspondent in the port city.